

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-02 INR-07 L-02

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 OMB-01

/055 W

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R 051024Z APR 75

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3135

INFO /AMEMBASSY AMMAN 519

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1271

BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, SY

SUBJECT: STATUS OF SYRIAN BAATH PARTY ELECTIONS

1. BOTH DAMASCUS PAPERS APRIL 4 CARRIED IDENTICAL HEADLINE: "SIXTH REGIONAL CONGRESS OF THE PARTY BEGINS ITS ACTIVITIES TOMORROW." PAPERS ADDED THAT CONGRESS WILL PROCEED IN THREE STAGES: (A) DEBATE OF ORGANIZATIONAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REPORTS SUBMITTED BY THE LEADERSHIP; (B) DEFINITION OF FRAMEWORK WITHIN WHICH PARTY WILL CONTINUE TO CARRY OUT ITS HISTORIC RESPONSIBILITIES IN COMING PERIOD; AND (C) ELECTION OF A NEW REGIONAL COMMAND. ACCOMPANYING ARTICLE NOTED THAT ELECTION OF DELEGATES TO CONGRESS HAD BEEN COMPLETED IN BOTH CIVILIAN AND MILITARY BRANCHES OF PARTY. THIS IS SIXTH REGIONAL CONGRESS HELD SINCE BAATH PARTY SEIZED POWER 1963. NEW COMMAND WILL SERVE FOUR-YEAR TERM.

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2. WE UNDERSTAND FROM VARIOUS SOURCES THAT TWO-STAGE

SELECTION PROCESS OF CONGRESS DELEGATES THAT HAS TAKEN PLACE IN PAST FEW WEEKS HAS BEEN ACCOMPANIED BY WIDESPREAD DETENTION (NUMBERS RANGE FROM 100 TO 300) OF SYRIAN SYMPATHIZERS OF CIVILIAN (IRAQI) WING OF BAATH PARTY. REASON FOR THESE ARRESTS, WHICH INCLUDED SEVERAL WELL RESPECTED PARTY MEMBERS IN ALEPPO AND DAMASCUS, HAS BEEN VARIOUSLY EXPLAINED AS ASSURING NO IRAQI INTERVENTION IN ELECTIONS AND/OR SIMPLY AS ASSURING THAT "RIGHT" DELEGATES WERE CHOSEN.

3. DESPITE THESE PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES, HOWEVER, SOME NOT ON THE LIST APPARENTLY SUCCEEDED IN BEING ELECTED TO CONGRESS. ACCORDING TO LOCAL JOURNALIST SOURCE, ONE OF THESE WAS MARWAN HAMWI, DIRECTOR OF SYRIAN ARAB NEWS AGENCY, WHO REPORTEDLY MADE UNUSUALLY STRONG SHOWING IN DELEGATE ELECTIONS. GROUP FROM PARTY INNER CORE THEN OFFERED HIM DAMASCUS GOVERNORSHIP BUT HE TURNED IT DOWN "BECAUSE HE EXPECTED BE TOO BUSY AS MEMBER OF NEW REGIONAL COMMAND." NEXT DAY HE WAS PICKED UP BY SYRIAN MILITARY SECURITY, REPORTEDLY ON PERSONAL ORDER OF ITS DIRECTOR, COLONEL ALI DUBBA, AND DESPITE EFFORTS OF FRIENDS INCLUDING MIN INFORMATION AHMAD ISKANDAR, HAD NOT BEEN RELEASED AS OF APRIL 3. EXPECTATION WAS THAT HE WOULD BE RELEASED TO ATTEND CONGRESS, BUT SIGNAL HAD BEEN CLEARLY GIVEN THAT HIS SUPPORTERS SHOULD CAST THEIR VOTES ELSEWHERE.

4. COMMENT: SARG'S PUBLICIZING OF BAATH REGIONAL CONGRESS IS UNUSUAL AND PROBABLY REFLECTS FACT THAT PRESENT REGIME HAS BROUGHT SUBSTANTIAL MEASURE OF STABILITY TO COUNTRY AND IS IN FACT FIRST REGIME TO SERVE OUT ITS FOUR-YEAR TERM. IT ALSO SEEMS CLEAR THAT ASAD-AND-COMPANY ARE TAKING ALL MEASURES THEY DEEM NECESSARY TO ASSURE THAT EVENTS FOLLOW THEIR PRE-DETERMINED COURSE.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PARTY LINE, POLITICAL PARTIES, ELECTIONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 05 APR 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GarlanWA
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975DAMASC01271
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750119-0087
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750478/aaaactku.tel
Line Count: 97
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GarlanWA
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 01 AUG 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <01 AUG 2003 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <04 SEP 2003 by GarlanWA>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: STATUS OF SYRIAN BAATH PARTY ELECTIONS
TAGS: PINT, SY
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006